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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 000012

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR D, SA, SA/INS, SA/PD, INR/NESA;  
NSC FOR E. MILLARD

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/05/14  
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KPAO](#) [PINR](#) [CE](#) [LTTE](#)  
SUBJECT: Sri Lanka: U.S. efforts to help end  
cohabitation impasse net big local reaction

Refs: 03 Colombo 2200, and previous

(U) Classified by James F. Entwistle, Deputy Chief of  
Mission. Reasons 1.5 (b,d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: Sri Lanka has been abuzz the last several days with reaction to the Secretary's letters to the President and the PM, and the Department's statement issued after the Deputy Secretary met with Minister Moragoda last week. Press reaction has been mixed, with some commentary supporting the U.S. effort to help break the cohabitation logjam and others critical of USG involvement in the matter. In the only statement thus far from a political party, the radical JVP played the USG for its efforts. Local observers we have spoken to have generally praised the U.S. We think the USG messages have helped by reminding the parties involved in the impasse that the international community is watching and wants them to compromise. Reftel reviews the Ambassador's meeting with the PM regarding the Secretary's letter and Septel reviews that with the President. A full media play cable also follows Septel. END SUMMARY.

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Mixed Press Reaction  
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2. (C) Sri Lanka has been abuzz the last several days with reaction to Secretary Powell's letters to President Chandrika Kumaratunga and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, and the Department's statement issued after Deputy Secretary Armitage's December 29 meeting with Economic Reforms Minister Milinda Moragoda. (Although the texts of the Secretary's letters were apparently not made public, their basic contents were leaked to the press either by the President's or PM's office, or both. See Reftel for a readout of the Ambassador's December 31 meeting with the PM and Septel reviewing his January 2 meeting the President.) To a large extent, the local press, in remarking on the USG messages, conflated the Secretary's letters with the Department's statement. At times, for example, the coverage made it appear that Minister Moragoda's visit to Washington precipitated the Secretary's letters, when in fact the letters were in process well before Moragoda's trip.

3. (SBU) Thus far, press reaction has been mixed, with some editorials supporting the U.S. effort to help break the cohabitation logjam and others critical of USG involvement in the matter. (Note: See Septel for full review of the media play.) On the positive side, all four Sunday (January 4) English-language papers ran front-page articles on the Secretary's letters that were basically accurate in describing the nature of the U.S. effort, i.e., that we urged both leaders to work together in the national interest. In terms of commentary, the U.S. effort was also touched on in a basically positive manner in the following two editorials:

-- A January 5 editorial in the independent English-language DAILY MIRROR "welcomed international mediation from countries like the USA, India or UK, who all have an interest in bringing about a permanent settlement here."

-- A January 5 editorial in the independent Tamil daily THINAKKURAL said "while the pressure put forward by the US clearly shows the US interest in solving the ethnic problem it can be considered as the pressure representing the international community."

4. (SBU) Some press reaction was not as positive:

-- A January 4 commentary in the independent English-language weekly SUNDAY TIMES said the PM was pursuing "a

strategy of destabilizing the President by non-violent strategic means" involving the "application of pressure via the international community -- in other words, Ranil's favorite international safety net." After meeting Moragoda, the Deputy Secretary "soon issued a statement saying the President's moves are not good for the country or the peace process. There of course was little or no subtlety in it...it leaves room for everyone to say exactly where America's sympathies are."

-- January 4 commentary in the independent weekender SUNDAY LEADER said the Department's statement "by remarking that the political crisis was precipitated in Colombo while Wickremesinghe was in Washington, the US had implied very strongly, it is Kumaratunga who is responsible for the crisis."

-- January 4 commentary in the government-owned weekly SUNDAY OBSERVER criticized the GSL's support of the "hegemony of the U.S. of A," implying that the U.S. messages were some sort of quid pro quo favor made by the U.S. to the PM.

-- A January 1 editorial in the independent Sinhala-language daily DIVAINA, critical of the U.S. armed interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, closed with the following question: "Does Armitage's statement mean that if Sri Lanka's crisis is not solved, the US is going to invade Sri Lanka?"

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JVP Flays U.S.; No Comment yet from Tigers  
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15. (SBU) In the only statement thus far from a political party, the radical Janantha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) flayed the USG for its efforts. The party's statement came in the wake of the Department's December 29 statement. In its statement, the JVP rejected "the attempt of the USA or any other force tampering in the internal affairs of Sri Lanka." The group further denounced the PM, accusing him of "getting 'world powers' to intimidate people."

16. (SBU) For its part, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) organization has not weighed in with their own commentary on the Secretary's letters or the Department's statement. The pro-LTTE website "TamilNet," however, reported the Department's statement in a factual way in a December 30 posting.

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Praise from Local Observers  
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17. (C) Local observers that we have touched base with have generally praised the U.S. efforts:

-- Jehan Perera of the National Peace Council, a local think-tank, said he felt the majority of Sri Lankans were happy with the U.S. efforts. He added that the two Sri Lankan leaders seemed more focused on personal dynamics rather than external concerns at this point, so he wondered whether the U.S. effort would have much of an impact.

-- Ven. Bellanwilla Wimalaratna Thero, a well-regarded Colombo-area Buddhist monk, spoke appreciatively of the U.S. messages. He further hoped that other donor countries would follow the U.S. lead in urging the two parties to stop bickering and work together.

-- Azmi Thassim, director of the Chamber of Commerce in the southern coastal town of Hambantota, felt that only the U.S. would be able to end the current political impasse between the President and PM. Thassim, a Muslim, was thankful for the U.S. efforts and its support for a near-term resumption of GSL-LTTE peace talks.

-- Kethesh Loganathan, an analyst at the Center for Policy Alternatives, a local think-tank, told poloff January 5 that he thought the U.S. message was a welcome one. That said, he remarked that the U.S. was risking getting too involved in the details of the cohabitation conflict, which might lead to misunderstandings down the road.

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COMMENT  
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18. (C) The anti-U.S. reaction came from expected quarters: the JVP is consistently anti-American and the press criticism came from papers that often take an anti-U.S. slant. Despite the flak, we think that the U.S. efforts have helped the situation by reminding Sri

Lanka's cohabitation antagonists that the international community is watching. The message that the U.S. would like to see the President and the PM compromise so the GSL can get back to focusing on the peace process resonates with many in the public. Whether U.S. efforts -- in league with those of others in the international community -- might provide the two sides a fresh impetus to compromise remains unclear given the depth of distrust with which the two sides regard each other.  
END COMMENT.

19. (U) Minimize considered.

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